

The Struggles and Triumphs of a Novice Teacher

by Jean C. Murphy



I came to know Ms. Young as a preservice teacher at Chicago State University. She was a bright, intelligent student who demonstrated a high level of skill and enthusiasm for the profession of teaching [primary level]—so high that she was asked to address the graduating body of student teachers with the notion that her ideals would energize her peers. At graduation, she was an especially eager new African-American teacher ready for her pupils and whatever challenges might emerge. She wanted to be part of the legacy of African-American teachers who dedicated themselves to the development and instruction of African-American children in urban settings. What follows is a narrative about her journey into the profession, her struggles, perseverance, and ability to always keep clear her vision of helping students to succeed. New teachers will be buoyed by her resilience, perseverance, and ability to remain focused on the children's needs in the face of administrative obstacles.

“Are you sure you can handle third grade?”

asked the principal of the young and eager would-be first-year teacher, Ms. Young. “Yes, certainly,” responded the confident recent graduate of a teacher education program. “Where’s my classroom?”

Hired! Young was jubilant about the outcome of her interview. She was pleased that the administration had chosen her; she had chosen them. She had intentionally selected this low-performing school, located in a low-income, high-risk Chicago neighborhood, because she wanted to make a difference—to motivate, inspire, and ignite African-American

children’s passion for learning. She was on fire as one whom Ayers (1993) characterized as a caring teacher committed to the lives of students. Young’s values determined her choice.

Denied! Eager to get her room set up in advance of the children’s first day, she made many attempts to bring in the crates of instructional materials and aids purchased with her own meager funds over the summer months. Young understood through her course of study that the physical environment of a classroom can support and enhance learning. Greenman (1989) suggested that a rich, responsive learning environment can contribute to potent learning. However, this was not to take place. The same principal who indicated that she was a welcomed member of the faculty presented her with her first challenge: he repeatedly denied her access to the room to which she was assigned.

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Denied! Eager to know the names of children assigned to her third-grade classroom, she sought to receive the class roster in advance of the start of school. Again, this request was denied by the principal, who told her she did not need the list. Young understood differently. She understood that children, as do all people, have a hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1968) that must be met before motivated learning can kick in. To deny her access to the names of her children was tantamount to denying the safety and psychological needs of her children.

Shocked! Stunned! Flab-bergasted! Her simple requests, which seemed to her to be the inalienable rights of any teacher, were being denied. She was perplexed, particularly because her employment interview had gone so well. She couldn't understand what appeared to be a 180-degree about-face on the part of the principal. In spite of these challenges (lack of access to her classroom and student roster), she remained hopeful; she was there to inspire and motivate.

Finally, only one day in advance of the start of school, the newly graduated novice teacher was given the class roster and allowed to enter her assigned classroom. She rushed about to get things in order, to prepare for the arrival of her students. And arrive they did! Twenty-five, at first.

Heightened exuberance, enthusiasm, eager anticipation, and a sense of professional satisfaction reigned until Young was met face-to-face with the challenges of a less than ideal classroom. Young quickly determined that all but a few of

the children she received were "throwaways," children no other teachers wanted. The more senior teachers had been assigned the high-performing students. She, as a first-year teacher, had been assigned all the low-performing students—students who could not write a sentence, for whom everything had to be broken down, who were still working on visual and auditory discrimination skills, who were repeating the third grade for the first and second time, whose behaviors were continuously disruptive. The eager Ms. Young finally had the assigned class and class roster she had been promised. She had the students, and a teaching assistant for good measure. But the assigned classroom was a veritable dumping ground for children labeled as school failures.

While she had sought out a low-performing school, she had not anticipated being assigned to a classroom where all the children were low functioning. She felt overwhelmed, ill-prepared. Young had assumed that she would be assigned to a regular third-grade classroom in a low-functioning school where a few children were performing below grade level. This was reasonable; she did her student teaching at two different schools where class assignments had been mixed: children performing above, at, and below grade level. But this third-grade assignment was different. This was not the student constellation she had envisioned.

Sobered by the stark realities of her assignment, yet buoyed by her ongoing desire to work with children who needed to be inspired, Young committed

to accepting this unanticipated assignment and forging ahead on behalf of her children. She committed to children whose faces she would come to love in a very short time; and she committed to the profession of teaching, as outlined in the National Association for the Education of Young Children's Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment (1998).

Undaunted by the challenges ahead, Young remained focused, remembering that she had selected the school, the neighborhood, and the challenge of igniting children's passion for learning. Then, within days of the start of the school year, the principal, without explanation, pulled the teaching assistant from Young's class and reassigned her elsewhere. Going it alone with failing students appeared illogical, and not in the best interests of her students. So, following school protocol, she made requests to the principal for assistance from support personnel, such as special education staff and the social worker. All requests were denied. Young was reminded by the principal that she had attested that she could teach third grade. The message seemed to be, "You've got third grade; go teach."

Young began to call for support from the assistant principal, who had seemed friendly during her initial visits to the school and prior to her official hiring. These efforts were to no avail; the assistant principal was as unhelpful as the principal. Young's frustration increased as fellow teachers witnessed her struggling with students and confirmed her suspicion that she had, indeed,

been assigned the most difficult children, those whom no other teacher wanted. Young's frustration increased even further as the principal assigned six more children to her classroom, three of whom were functioning below grade level.

Frustrated. She cried many nights in total frustration from the inexplicable lack of administrative help and support. She shared her feelings of frustration with several audiences: her parents, who themselves were classroom teachers; her former professor and advisor; and peers who had been in her graduating class. Some encouraged her to stick it out; others encouraged her to seek a transfer to another school with a more teacher-friendly environment. Between the tears and anguish, she listened to the advice. Young began exploring options. She checked with the teachers' union about teachers' rights, and she registered complaints about the treatment of first-year teachers. She checked with the school system's personnel department on the process and timing for transfer to another school.

Distraught. Soon, she became distraught over the possibility of leaving the children with whom she had connected, the children she now loved. She reasoned with emotion. Who else would love these failing children as she did? Who would take her place? Could she desert these same failing children as others had? She talked with another first-year colleague, a seventh-grade teacher at her school who was considering leaving the profession, as so many first-year teachers do (adding to the

teacher shortage [Foster 1997]). Young resolved that this would not be her lot. She would not be driven out by the challenges of poor administration, nor would she abandon children who clearly needed her help and her commitment. Influenced by the writings of Collins (1992), she knew that even ordinary children required extraordinary teachers—teachers who encouraged in spite of and because of challenges. Young intended to be extraordinary!

she threatened to quit if support was not forthcoming. Though the principal expressed her dissatisfaction with Young; she did respond to her fervent requests, finally granting her a permanent teaching assistant. Through perseverance, a clear vision for her children, and hard work, she won a major victory.

Buoyed by this concession, Young began thinking even more strategically. "How can I garner the support and assistance of parents? How can I garner the support and assistance of the school's support personnel (social workers, special education department, counselors)?" Where there is a will, there is a way! She decided to make direct appeals to parents and support personnel, rather than going through administrative channels—too much red tape, too many hassles, and the real possibility of yet another denial. First, she called on parents—phoning them each night, providing explicit homework instructions and learning aids to help their children. In the case of children who were suspected of having a special need, she informed parents of their legal rights to referral for their children and to participation in the assessment process. She even offered to write letters for them if they needed support.

Befriending school personnel, the counselors, and social workers was another part of her strategic plan. She began connecting with them about personal matters, dropping compliments about the style of their hair or new clothing items they wore.

Connection made. Bridge formed. Befriended! The counselor and social worker respond-

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With struggle comes victory.

So, this first-year, first-semester teacher—cloaked with visions of her needy children who already were condemned to failure—requested a meeting with the principal. Persevering on behalf of her students, she boldly shared with the principal her frustrations and begged and pleaded for supports she deemed necessary to teach effectively. She believed in her children, and wanted them to rise to her expectations and to their abilities (Collins 1992). She articulated the academic status of her children and their needs, and

ed and began partnering with Young to support the academic progress of her students. Seven children were referred for special needs, and four for testing. This was a major accomplishment within this large urban school system. Normally, this process takes one to two full years to accomplish. Young, through her commitment, persistence, and advocacy for the children, was able to accomplish this within her first semester. The social worker began to make regular visits to the classroom, connecting with children and partnering with Young to facilitate their progress. Another victory!

Leaving no one out of her strategic plan toward success, she remembered the mentor she had been assigned at the beginning of the school year. This teacher was a reluctant mentor who accepted the assignment in name only. Her conception of mentoring seemed archaic, influenced by a previous time when mentorships were didactic by nature. The mentor was neither assertive nor aggressive in supporting the novice teacher. However, Young—the ever-hopeful novice teacher—had different conceptions of mentoring. She understood the role to be more “philetic” (Acheson and Gall 1997)—based on the caring and compassion of an older, more seasoned teacher who could give advice and help shape careers. With these conceptions in mind, Young seized the initiative and began requesting from her mentor specific information on teaching techniques and alternative approaches. She framed the relationship to meet her needs and the needs of her students.

Hopeless! Not a word in Young's universe. She managed to succeed where previous teachers had failed. She was proud to have more parent volunteers and greater attendance at parent-teacher conferences than other teachers in the school. Her children progressed to the point where they were more engaged and actively involved in instruction and learning. Their overall behaviors improved to the point that she could conduct whole and small groups with little or no interruption. She learned that when teachers have faith in their students' abilities and advocate for them by making the necessary connections and linkages to resources, children respond, make progress, and learn.

Progress! By mid-year, her students had progressed! “My kids are catching up,” reported Young. “They do much better work; they are improving. I do a lot of one-on-one and small group [with the help of] my assistant, [who] is heaven sent.” No longer designated as a collection of failures, her classroom was recognized for having children of differentiated abilities. In her class, children have hope, and the teacher has expectations for academic growth and progress. In her class, children's rights are championed by a committed teacher. “We're jammin’,” remarked Young.

Young managed to overcome her initial feelings of abandonment by the principal and assistant principal. She also managed to win the support and admiration of her more senior colleagues for shame-

lessly championing the needs of the children assigned to her third-grade classroom and for questioning the unreasonable decisions and edicts of the principal. “I'm setting a tone, and everybody knows it! I'm the talk of the school,” reported Young. “I've gotten my students what they need, and I feel very good about it.”

Today, teacher colleagues as well as administration know that Young is not shy about asking for what her students need. She is not intimidated by administration, but rather views it as a resource. She remains focused on her original goals: to motivate, inspire, and ignite children's passion for learning. She stays on top of her students' needs and is ever vigilant and relentless about advocating for them. Young, like Collins (1992), believes that anybody can give up on a child, anybody can assess a child as a failure, and anybody can send a child to the office; that's a very poor teacher. The superior teacher always has the idea that just one more time, perhaps a different strategy, or another resource will do it. This belief—this pedagogical approach—made Young an extraordinary first-year teacher.

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